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*Introducing order where there was none, by imposing the unity of mind on the diversity of things. That is, I
feel myself essential in relation to my creation – Sartre*

The Tyranny of Reason: a Nietzschean Analysis of Logocentric Deceit in Margaret
Atwood's *Surfacing*

In Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, the unnamed narrator deconstructs the binds of logocentric nomenclature by purging the primacy of reason, privileging a union with nature for the 'civility' of linguistic fascism. The narrator, accompanied by her lover, Joe, and couple, David and Anna, venture into rural Quebec in an attempt to uncover the details surrounding her father's suspicious disappearance; however, the narrator, fueled by the desire for knowledge, embarks upon a journey of self-discovery in which she ends up rebelling against an internalization of a language which demands reason for an intimate connection to nature. In doing so, Atwood highlights how reason plays no role within the natural realm, for "nature knows neither forms nor concepts[...], but only an 'X' which is inaccessible to us and indefinable by us" (Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" 878); therefore, any effort to make sense of nature by rendering it into rational terms is merely a selfish project[ion], aiming to subdue nature for man's purpose. Focusing on Nietzsche's work, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense", I will attempt to delineate how the narrator's journey from language to lucidity is a step towards living an authentic existence, guided by individual intuition as opposed to the rigidity of reason.

In *Surfacing*, reason, knowledge, and logic are under attack, being critiqued as fabricated concepts. According to Nietzsche,

‘To know’ means something like ‘to impose categories upon chaotic processes that make the world useful to us and give us a sense of power and control.’ Even mathematics and logical deduction are merely human contrivances, ‘presuppositions with which nothing in the real world corresponds.’ (Robinson 15)

The narrator draws negatively on the impulse to impose structure and organize nature through David and Joe’s documentary stating that “[David] wants to get shots of things they come across, random samples he calls them, and that will be the name of the movie too: *Random Samples*. When they’ve used up their supply of film [...] they’re going to look at what they’ve collected and rearrange it” (Atwood 10); this problematizing the process of documentation itself: the collection of data and its [re]organization in a [chrono]logical fashion. As such, this highlights the subjectivity of ‘order.’ Order is not natural; it is a way of making sense of the world in a logocentric society founded on logic and authority. Even the narrator describes how “the only part [she] liked was picking up the cards and arranging them” (82), suggesting that it is human nature to impulsively order things by employing rationality. Therefore, the impulse to impose order over nature, to structure and form it into something that caters to a human end is a means of centering man within the order of the world at large, making him the dominant being capable of subduing everything to achieve his desired end.

As such, knowledge is used to satisfy human ends. According to Nietzsche, “[h]uman beings can have no access to the world as it ‘really’ is, and any desire to have

such access is both misguided and wicked. Human needs and desires determine what we label as ‘knowledge’ or consider to be ‘true.’ This means that words like ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ are no more than terms of praise applied to successful and useful discourse” (Robinson 71). In other words, “logic does not reflect the world or offer any kind of truth guarantees. It is just our human way of creating a convenient ‘reality’ that we find adequate to our needs” (18); therefore, “logic is a very useful survival tool, but that is *all* it is” (19). The notion of knowledge as a survival tool is explored through the narrator’s father, someone who retreats from society to live hermitically on a remote island. He “believe[s] that with proper guide books you could do everything yourself” (38), suggesting that knowledge can dominate, even in the face of nature’s elements. Moreover, knowledge is one’s defense against a natural environment, a tool for self-preservation. However, when the narrator stumbles upon her father’s project, she proclaiming that “[she] reasoned it out, unraveled the clues in his puzzle the way he taught us and they’d led nowhere. [She] felt as though he’d lied to [her]” (127), suggesting that although reason is useful for dealing with the world at large, instilling value through a participatory relationship with it, it is unreliable and deceiving.

Therefore, one must caution that “Truth” is a human invention to order and make sense of the world. We invent ways of understanding nature by molding it into something subordinate. As such, “[h]uman beings build with the [...] delicate material of concepts which he must first manufacture from himself” (Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” 879); therefore, “a regular and rigid new world is built from its own sublimated products---concepts---in order to imprison it in a fortress” (882). In other words, through our ‘creative’ concepts, we are imprisoned within our delusions. For

example, the narrator states that “the secret had come clear, it had never been secret, I’d made it one, that was easier. My eyes came open, I began to arrange” (Atwood 103). After deducing that her suspicions of her father’s insanity were unwarranted, with her ‘eyes open’, given the opportunity to see clearly that there is no truth, the narrator sets to work rearranging the ‘facts’, constructing a newer, updated version of reality. In this respect, we suffer from reason, and are constantly inventing new ways of coping with the world; essentially, constructing further illusions, fragmenting ourselves from the real. The narrator articulates this process of filling in the gaps with reason, inventing her way to the truth, stating “my brain was rushing, covering over the bad things and filling the empty spaces with an embroidery of calculations and numbers, I needed to finished, I had never finished anything” (133). The concept of finishing, solidifying, making concrete, and the narrator’s inability, suggests that the search for truth is futile because it is an invention in constant revision.

We are no closer to understanding the truth, but rather, we develop a more elaborate system to superimpose over nature. We ‘see’ the image we project/expect, not the real. So much of the rational authority is rooted and shaped by language. When the narrator investigates further into the folder containing her father’s cryptic drawings, she uncovers a letter with an article attached, “*Aesthetic Qualities and Possible Significance*” (102), noting how “the academic prose breathed reason; [her] hypothesis crumbled like sand. This was the solution, the explanation: [her father] never failed to explain” (103), thus demonstrating how her anxieties, fuelled by her need for explanation, are pacified by reason and authority. However, “Nietzsche thought it was easy to forget that science is a social, historical and cultural human activity that *invents* rather than discovers immutable

‘laws of nature’” (Robinson 74). The scientific approach, inductive reasoning, is just another means of inventing an ‘authentic’ interpretation of nature to suit man’s need to developing means of coping with the human condition of meaninglessness, couched and ensconced within a world obsessed with truth and reason. Furthermore, the narrator comments “Anesthesia, that’s one technique: if it hurts invent a different pain”(Atwood 13). Therefore, through creative rationalism, we are all sedated, numbing ourselves from the void which presents itself. Moreover, Nietzsche states “[n]ature’s conformity to ‘law’ of which [...] physicists talk so proudly [...] exists only owing to [...] interpretation and bad philology [...] Things do not behave regularly, according to a rule: there are no things [...] they behave just as little under the constraint of a necessity [...] and our entire science still lies under the misleading influence of language” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 52). If language is a misleading structure, and we have internalized said structure and think within its confines and [purportedly] access truth through it, then what can be said about the relationship between truth and language?

Language serves as the means to further reinforce delusions. ‘The creator of language’ “designates only the relations of things to human beings, and in order to express them he avails himself of the boldest metaphors” (Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” 877); furthermore, “we believe that when we speak of trees, colours, snow, and flowers, we have knowledge of the things themselves, and yet we possess only metaphors of things which in no way correspond to the original entities” (877). Therefore, all concepts are merely suggestive figures of speech. As such, the narrator describes the elusiveness of her memories; their instability, being a product of both language and history, suggests that language, the means to our own consciousness,

is evasive and unreliable, simulating mentally the inability to even know one's self. For example,

I have to be more careful about my memories, I have to be sure they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said: if the events are wrong the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too, I'll start remembering them and there will be no way of correcting it[...] . I run quickly over my version of it, my life, checking it like an alibi. (Atwood 73)

The disconnect from memory elucidates how all formulations that serve to inform ourselves are illusory constructions.

As such, "it is language which works on building the edifice of concepts" (Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" 881). Language becomes the defining characteristic that encompasses identity. The narrator states "if you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them, [...] you speak their language, a language is everything you do" (Atwood 129), thus maintaining the inescapable constr[uc]tions of language. Therefore, as language is used to articulate our needs/purposes, it also confines us to its logos. According to Nietzsche, "[s]ocial and intellectual life depends on common concept, and this gives birth to a shared consensual reality in which such concepts as 'knowledge' inevitably emerge. These concepts are then reinforced by language" (Robinson 16). In addition, "[n]ot only will our grammar control the ways in which our thoughts are organized, but more drastically, it will determine what sorts of thoughts it is possible for us to have" (17). As such, language gives a structure for consciousness to articulate itself; however, only within the confines of its own reason. The narrator articulates this anguish, stating "I rehearsed emotions,

naming them: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it.” (Atwood 111). The narrator feels no natural connection to these words; therefore, they remain foreign to her, accentuating her feelings being unable to identify with anything through language. As such, expression of said emotions are expressed through mimesis¹, thus perpetuating the fragmentary powers of a logocentric language which demands conformity. Continuously, when David asks the narrator if she loves him, she is perplexed, thinking “I couldn’t use [‘love’] because it wasn’t mine. He must have known what he meant but it was an imprecise word; the Eskimoes had fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them, there ought to be an many for love” (106), thus further accentuating the failure of language to adequately articulate human emotion, suggesting instead that human emotions are defined and actualized by/through language itself.

Moreover, the narrator’s inability to identify with the learned emotions leaves her feeling empty, stifling any expression outside the logos of language. The narrator describes

the only thing there was the fear that I wasn’t alive: a negative, the difference between the shadow of a pin and what it’s like when you stick it in your arm, in a school caged in the desk I use to do that, with pen-nibs and compass points too, instruments of knowledge, English and Geometry; they’ve discovered rats prefer any sensation to none” (111).

Logocentricism suffocates any emotion that remains undefined, making life, in effect, predetermined and ‘caged’ by language. As such, the narrator uses ‘instruments of

¹ By mimesis, I am referring to both the way in which words are sought to mimic reality and the manner in which language itself is a process that is learnt through repetition, expressing and conf[o/i]rming one’s relationship to language as being formative and emendatory.

knowledge' to stimulate herself to feel a physical sensation. However, she uses these instruments in violent manner because they have stunted and disabled her from experiencing anything authentic, suggesting that any sensation within the confines of reason is forced and fictionalized. The narrator endeavours to escape the shackles of language to experience a reality outside its dominion.

According to Nietzsche, “[e]verything which distinguishes human beings from animals depends on this ability to sublimate sensuous metaphors into a schema, in other words, to dissolve an image into a concept” (“On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” 878). Therefore, when the narrator chooses to endure life outside language, she enters into a world unregulated by reason, blurring the lines between herself and nature, image and concept, fusing and [re]integrating herself back into the natural order. When in nature, the narrator “no longer h[as] a name. [She] tired for all those years to be civilized but [she’s] not and [she’s] through pretending” (Atwood 168), suggesting that language casts the illusory verisimilitude of civilized society because everyone must adapt and conform to the same language to communicate. Therefore, when the narrator chooses to be alone, she claims that “from [her] rational point of view [she] [is] absurd; but there are no longer any rational points of view” (169) in nature. Outside language, the narrator notes how foreign language is, “ululating, electronic signals thrown back and forth between them, hooo, hooo, they talk in numbers, the voice of reason’ (185). Having purged the logos of language, the narrator articulates the new sensation of liberation, no longer modulated and structured by language/reason: “my fingers are empty as gloves, eyes ordinary, nothing guides me” (171). Once freed from logocentric subjectivity, the

narrator is guided by her own intuition², shedding a “caseful of alien words and failed pictures, canvas bundle of clothes, nothing [she] need[s]” (164). No longer in need of the comforts of logic and reason, the narrator comments on how “sight flowed ahead of [her] over the ground, eyes filtering the shapes, the names of things fading but their forms and uses remaining, the animal learned what to eat without nouns” (150). By returning to nature, the narrator returns to herself, unleashed, unrefined, emancipated.

However, to become unreasonable bears the threat of being scorned by those who still value it, for “there are epochs in which the man of reason and the man of intuition stand side by side, the one fearful of intuition, the other filled with scorn for abstraction, the latter as unreasonable as the former is unartistic” (Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” 883). The narrator remarks that “being socially retarded is like being mentally retarded, it arouses in others disgust and pity and the desire to torment and reform” (Atwood 72); however, ‘disgust’ and ‘pity’ are superficial concepts, motivated by a logos that demands total submission. A question remains whether or not to be a victim of language, “[a] lie which [is] [...] more disastrous than the truth”(191)? For her, “the word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death” (191): “lucidity, in the face of a world in peril” (Blais 194).

² “The vast assembly of beams and boards to which the needy man clings, thereby saving himself on his journey through life, is used by the liberated intellect as a mere climbing frame and plaything on which to perform its most reckless tricks; and when it smashes this framework, jumbles it up and ironically re-assembles it, pairing the most unlike things and dividing those things which are closest to one another, it reveals the fact that it does not require those makeshift aids of neediness, and that it is now guided, not by concepts but by intuitions” (Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” 883)

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